


COMBS



Tribes in India

Bharati Debi
Anshu Prokash Nandan



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GOLDEN JUBILEE (1945-1995)

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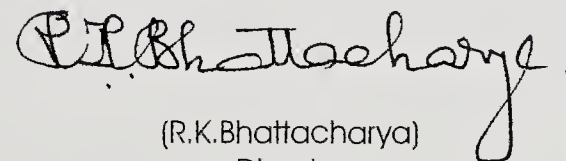
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A Riang woman and her comb

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FOREWORD

Comb is a tool, it is an artefact, it is art and it is a gift exchanged between two persons who desire to cement their relationship, if not always on a permanent basis, but certainly distinguished from other such relationships. This innocuous object assumes many meanings and many uses in different circumstances. Today in the consumerist aeon, there is a term "beautility" meaning an object is created balancing its aesthetic and utility values, we do not need to learn of this from formal designers, we only need to open our eyes wide and allow them to roam the country, peering into the material culture of people who in no way constitute the consumer class. The collection of combs and the anthropological notes that accompany them is a treat for our eyes bored with plastic, our senses that arouse a longing for the lost activities of leisure and our intellects for stimulating thirst for wider knowledge. The coming of machine technology has whittled down this skill and this volume plays a vital role in preserving this lost aspect of material culture. This volume is a compendium to the earlier publication ***Hairstyles***. This volume also showcases the variety of our (Anthropological Survey of India) collection in the interest of scholars, the general public as well as for the newer generations of the tribes, helping them to be aware of their recent heritage and tradition.



(R.K. Bhattacharya)
Director

Anthropological Survey of India

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INTRODUCTION

A comb is for hair care, a necessary item of cosmetry, one item that is possessed by every individual. A visit to the market will reveal the variety of combs that are available and a visit to the barber will educate as to the special uses of a variety of combs of which the barber seems to be a veritable master. Almost no Victorian novel does not have passages devoted to the silver hair brushes and mirror laid on the new bride's dressing table. No marriage in India can do without this being a part of the dowry/trousseau of both bride and the groom. The barber who symbolizes the comb and the scissors is a part of major Hindu life cycle rituals.

It is difficult to trace the origins of the comb from long ago in time. Protohistorical evidences suggest that this item had been fashioned quite early in response to man's need for grooming.

What is it of the comb that imparts this transcendence from an ordinary implement/tool to such ritual and social importance? What has been its place from ancient to the present times? What are the materials used in its making? What does it mean to different communities?

The world of the tribes offers us a glimpse into the rich heritage of the comb involving not only a host of emotions, but also aesthetic sense and artistic skill. The comb holds as yet a place of special significance in the lives of some tribes. Here the traditional and the modern combs exist side by side, one having special cultural value and the other an item of utility.

The care that is imparted to its fashioning and the embellishment that adorns it is reflected on other items of personal use like knives, arrows and bows.

The uniqueness of the combs used by the tribes of India lies in the fact that the handicrafts are made by themselves, barring however, the metallic or plastic combs.

Combs are made of wood, bamboo, soft roots, bone, horn, metal and plastic. Implements used are small saw, knife, chisel, adze and hot iron wire.

The youth among certain tribes patiently work on combs to present them to their sweethearts.



Root

DHURWA
Chhattisgarh

The tribal people of India make combs mostly out of bamboo, soft root or stem of certain plants. Comb made of buffalo horn is a bygone craft of the Banjaras.

The combs are worked upon by boys or men for their families, friends and for themselves. Their combs bear testimony to their imagination, patience, dexterity, discipline and concentration. These combs display a great variety.



Bamboo

KADAR
Kerala



Wood

JAUNSARI
Uttaranchal



Metal

RABHA
West Bengal

The forest dwelling Rabhas of West Bengal prepare a type of comb out of several pairs of knitting needles partly wrapped with an aluminium foil.

Combs made of brass, bronze and aluminium or its alloy are also used by some tribes.



Metal

DHURWA
Chhattisgarh



Combination

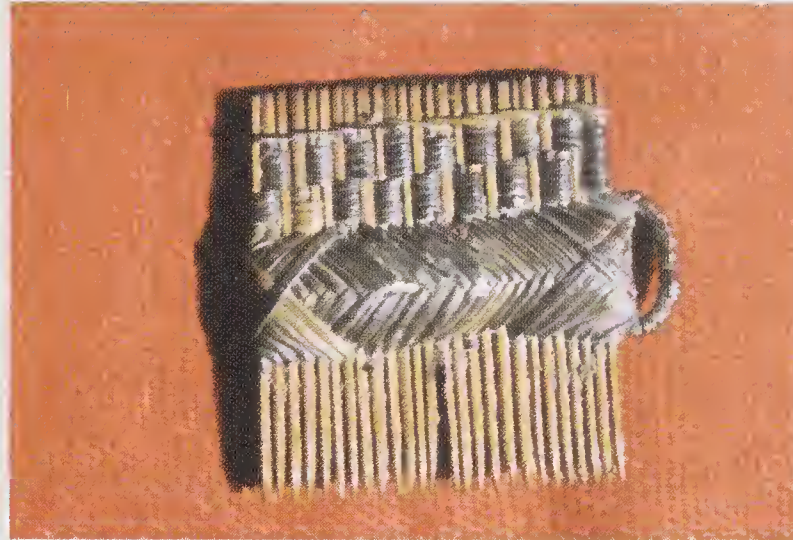
IDU MISHMI
Arunachal Pradesh

Combs vary in shape and size. Some are elongated while others are rectangular, square, triangular, semicircular, lunar, shovel-shaped and so on.



Elongated

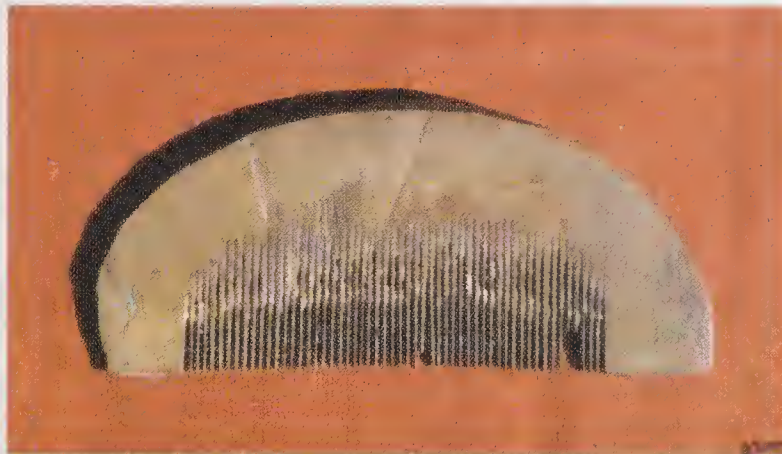
IRULA
Tamil Nadu



Square

DANDAMI MARIA
Chhattisgarh

The Murias, Dandami Marias, Khasis and others are seen to use combs of various shapes.



Semicircular

BHAINA
Chhattisgarh

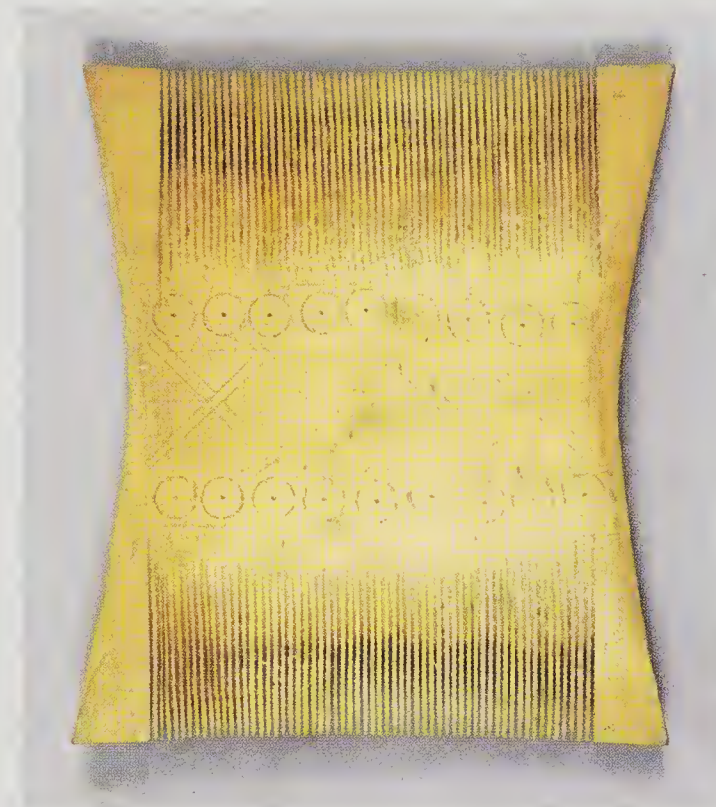


Elongated

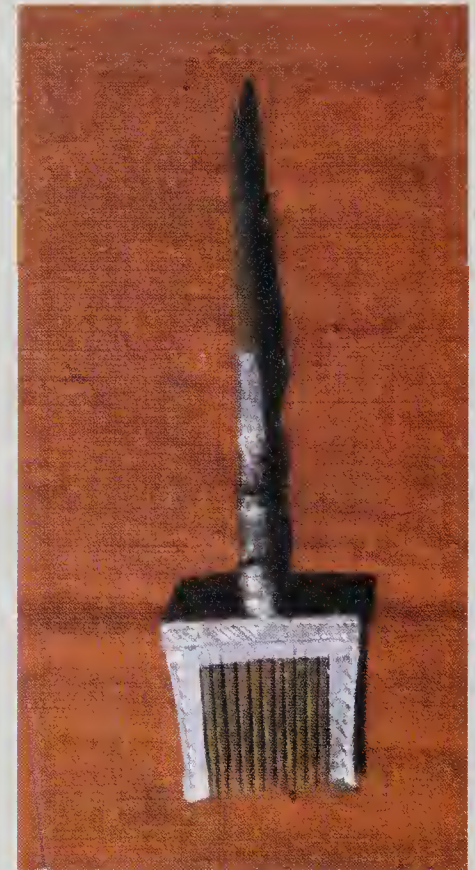
MUTHUVAN
Kerala



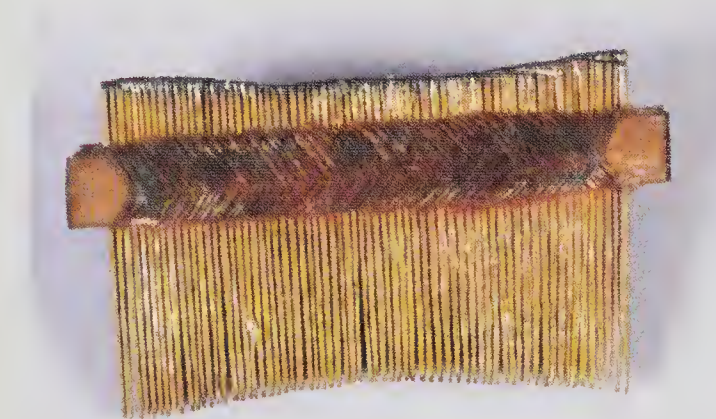
Lunar DANDAMI MARIA
Chhattisgarh



Spindle MURIA
Chhattisgarh



Shovel MURIA
Chhattisgarh

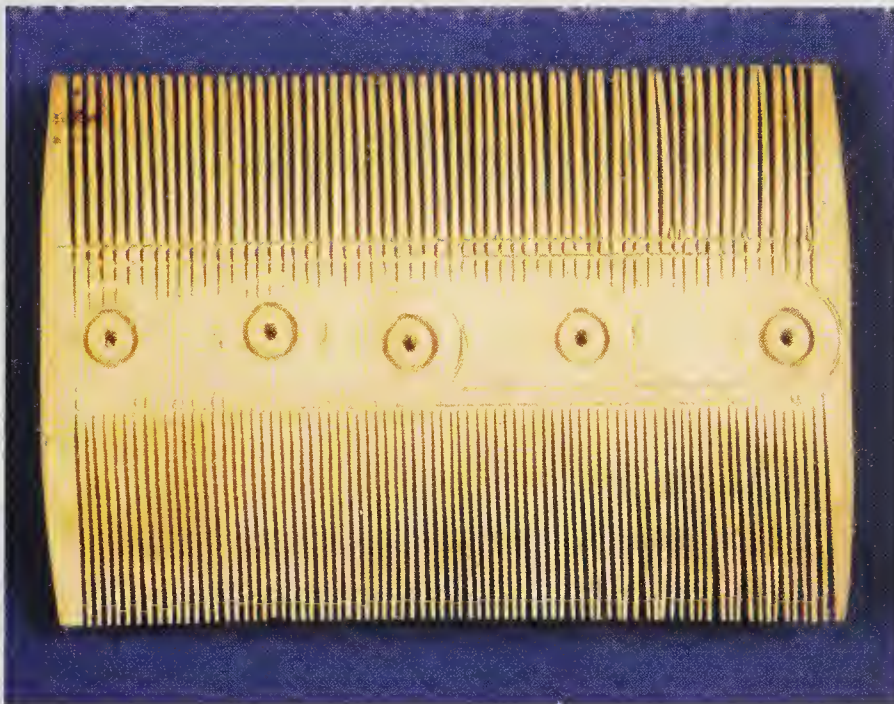


Rectangular DANDAMI MARIA
Chhattisgarh



Rectangular

KHASI
Meghalaya



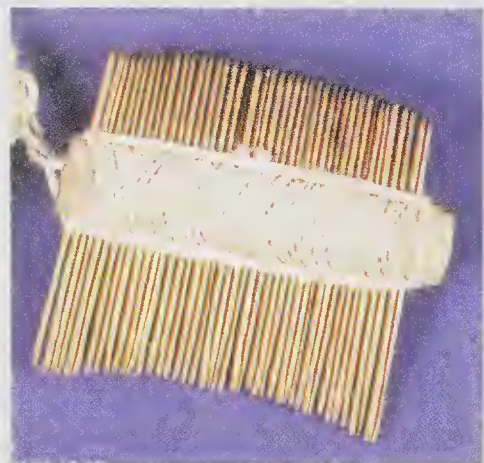
Rectangular

KHASI
Meghalaya



Triangular

KHASI
Meghalaya



Small

BAIGA
Chhattisgarh

There is no hard and fast rule for size of a comb. It may be big as well as small. Among the Kanikkars a comb may be as large as 27 cm long.

In some tribes combs worn by male members are generally bigger than those that the females wear.

Among the Baigas combs presented to a bride for her trousseau for keeping in the dowry box are very small in size (4 cm).



Medium

MURIA
Chhattisgarh



Large and long

KANIKKAR
Kerala



MURIA
Chhattisgarh

Among the Murias combs reflect gender dichotomy. The larger combs are used by the males while the smaller ones by the females.



Making of a comb by a MUNDA



AKA
Arunachal Pradesh

Some combs are made up of a single piece of organic material like bamboo flake or a piece of wood. In case of bamboo a nodal portion is often placed centrally as a divider between the working and non-working ends. The teeth are carefully carved out from the same piece.

The Uralis, Akas, Murias, Soligas, Kadars, Bharias and others use this type of comb.



DANDAMI MARIA
Chhattisgarh



PANIYAN
Tamil Nadu

Combs are also made by binding bamboo spikes with fine thread or vegetable fibre. The thread runs in crisscross fashion, diagonally, alternating squares or other geometric designs.

Such combs are found among the Idu Mishmis, Uchais, Riangs, Lepchas, Karbis, Paites, Khasis, Juangs, Dhurwas, Dandami Marias, Kawars and others.



LEPCHA
West Bengal



DHURWA
Chhattisgarh



DANDAMI MARIA
Chhattisgarh



JUANG
Orissa



KHASI
Meghalaya



PAITE
Mizoram



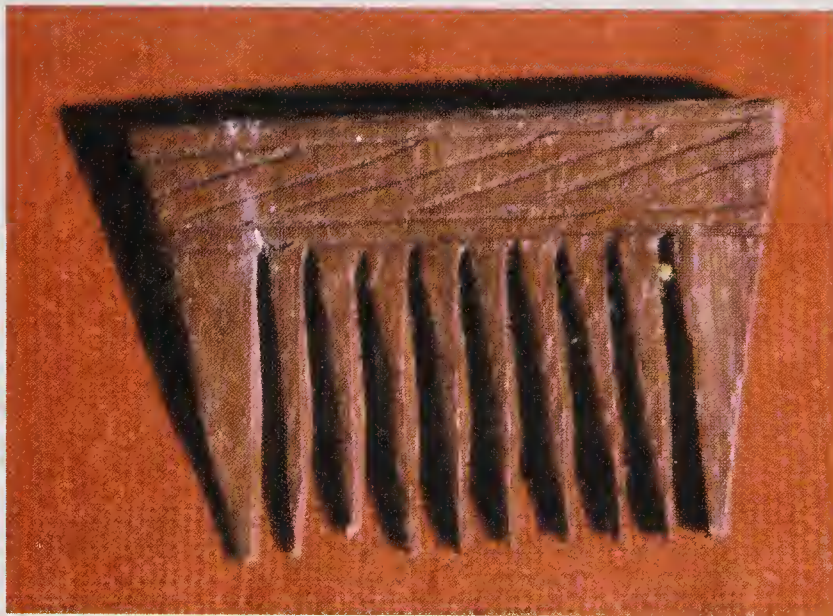
MURIA
Chhattisgarh

The Dandami Marias, Murias, Dhurwas and other tribes of Bastar in Chhattisgarh are the clients of an artisan group, the Gharuas or Ghadwas. They purchase beautiful brass or bronze combs prepared by *cire perdue* or lost wax process.

Cire perdue is a method of bronze casting using a clay core and a wax coating placed in a mould. The wax is melted in the mould when liquid bronze is poured into the wax coated space, producing a hollow bronze figure. Later the core is discarded.



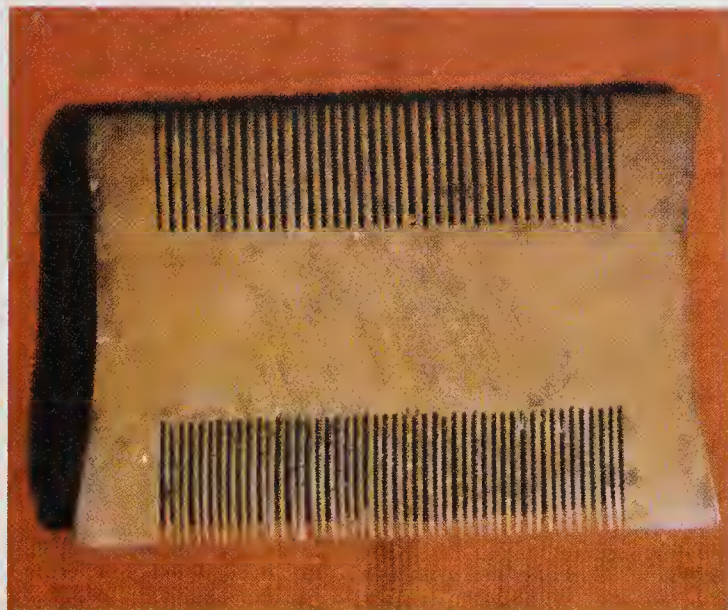
MURIA
Chhattisgarh



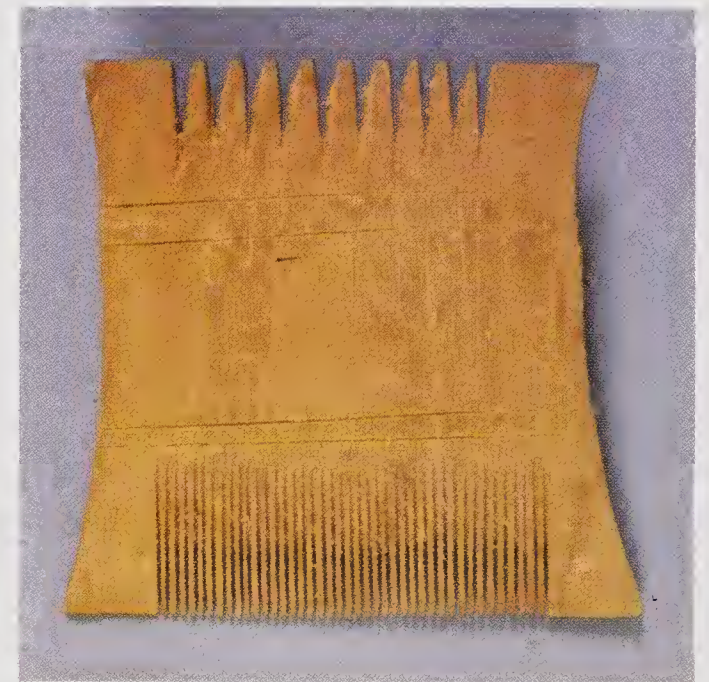
MURIA
Chhattisgarh

Combs may have a single working edge or double edges. The double-edged combs again may have similar or dissimilar working edges. Where the working edges are dissimilar, the coarser side is used for breaking knots of hair and the finer side is for hair setting.

Double edged combs are prevalent among the Jaunsaris, Lanjia Saoras, Khasis, Omanatias, Bhils, Murias and many others.



KOYA
Orissa



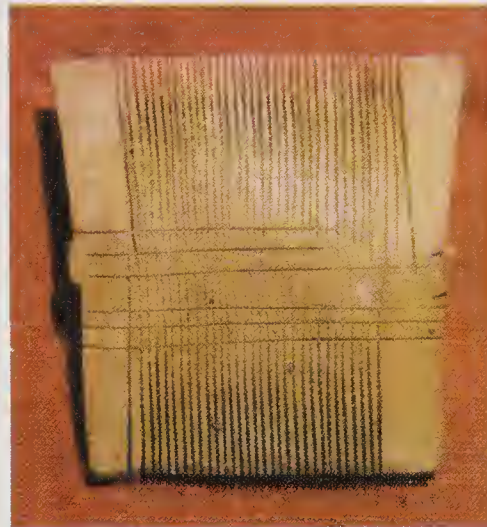
LANJIA SAORA
Orissa



RIANG woman wearing a comb



DORLA
Chhattisgarh



GADABA
Orissa

The primary function of a comb is hair dressing. It is often a must for all people, male or female, to take care of hair.



KADAR
Kerala



KARBI
Assam



SUGALI
Andhra Pradesh



IRULA
Tamil Nadu



MUNDA
West Bengal



SANTAL
West Bengal

Comb is a powerful tool used to delouse hair. The Lodhas, Kharias, Santals, Mundas and others use a kind of fine and elongated toothed comb for the purpose. The long teeth of the comb are pressed deep inside the bunch of hair touching the scalp and passed through the entire length of hair. Lice get stuck between the teeth. Instead of killing lice one by one the teeth are pressed together to kill all of them at a time.

The Kharias call such comb as *matcha* or *machna*.



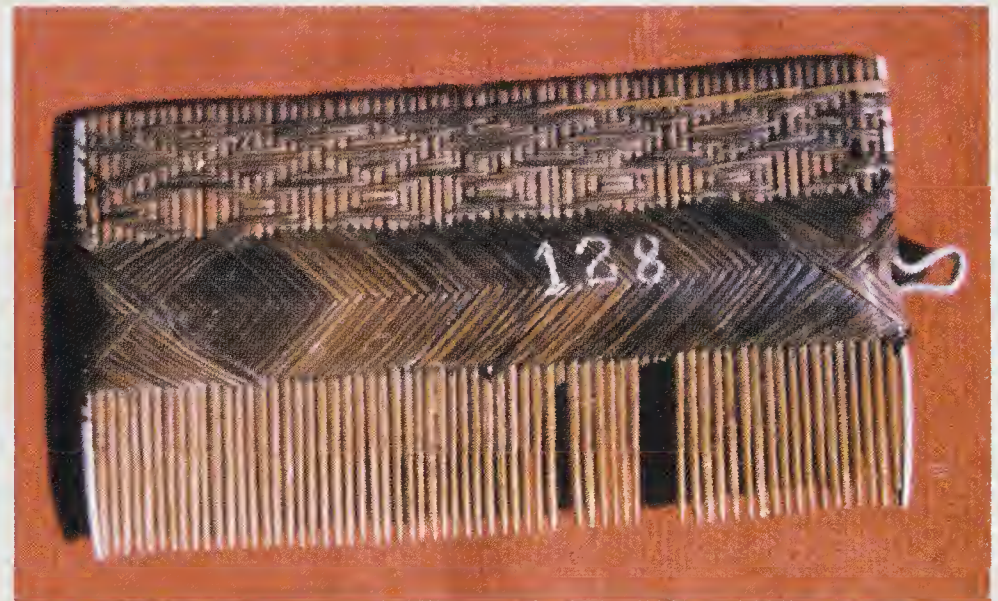
MURIA
Chhattisgarh



DANDAMI MARIA
Chhattisgarh

A zeal to look beautiful is innate in human mind. It traverses the boundary of time and space. Hair dressing is a vital part of grooming.

The Murias, Dhurwas, Dandami Marias use combs to decorate their hairdo.



DHURWA
Chhattisgarh



URALI
Kerala

Combs are set in hair when used as ornament. But a comb is often worn around one's neck just like a locket in a necklace by the womenfolk among the Uralis.

A small hole is made at the centre of the handle of a comb for passing a string.



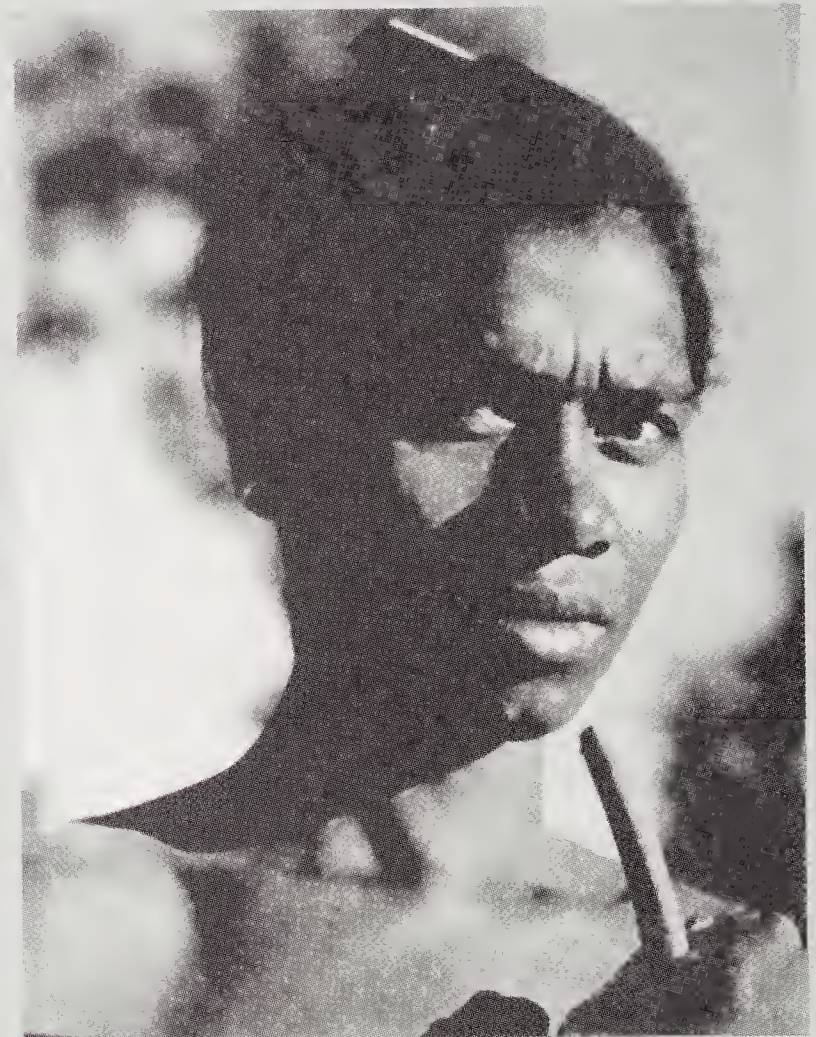
URALI
Kerala



URALI woman wearing a
comb as locket



A MURIA boy with combs
encased in turban



A comb on the scalp of a
DANDAMI MARIA youth



MURIA girls with series of
combs arranged sideways



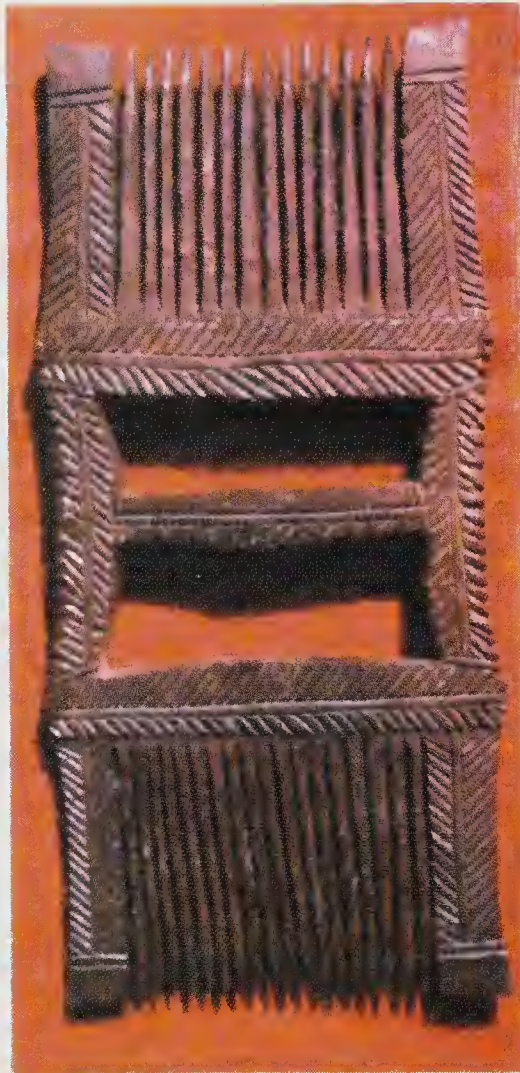
UCHAI
Tripura

Traditionally the first present of a Riang husband to his wife is a comb - a befitting ornament to decorate her graceful chignon.

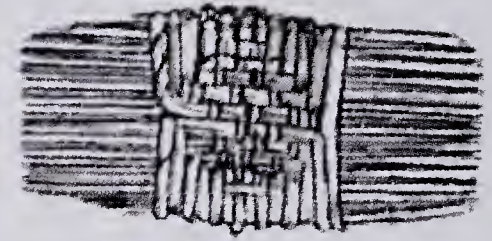
Combs help in understanding societal norms. Being unable to pay high bride-price the young Uchai groom used to serve in the family of the would-be bride. The first gift of such a husband to his new and young wife is customarily a comb - a piece of his own handicraft.



RIANG
Tripura



MURIA
Chhattisgarh



NAGA
Nagaland

Dormitory is an ancient and important institution of certain tribal communities. Presence of dormitory is recorded among a good number of tribes throughout India. It imparts training to the young individuals in social norms functionally related to every aspect of their life.

This is the age when the young falls in love. The young boys most passionately pour all their emotions in fashioning beautifully designed combs to present them to their sweethearts.



JUANG
Orissa



A *motiari* with her prized possession

Among the Murias both *cheliks* (young boys) and the *motiaris* (young girls) of a *ghotul* (dormitory) wear combs for decoration of hair.

These combs bear motifs related to their fertility cult.

Such combs are the prized possession among the Muria boys and girls.

Use of combs belonging to someone else is taboo, for these combs may exert evil influence on persons to whom they do not belong.



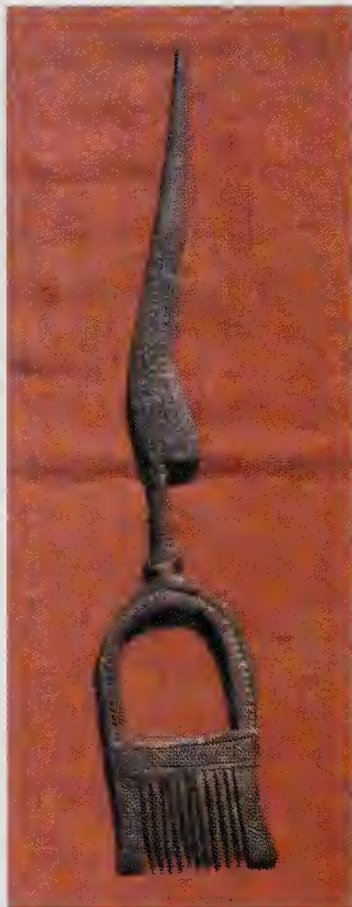
Cheliks engaged in making of combs



Busy in grooming of hair



MURIA
Chhattisgarh



MURIA
Chhattisgarh



MURIA
Chhattisgarh

The tribals are art-lovers. Their sense of aesthetics is perceptible in their effort to add beauty and grace to whatever their deft hands fashion and use, as seen in the case of combs. Exquisite designs carved on combs bespeak of their creativity and awareness of aesthetics.



MURIA
Chhattisgarh



URALI
Kerala

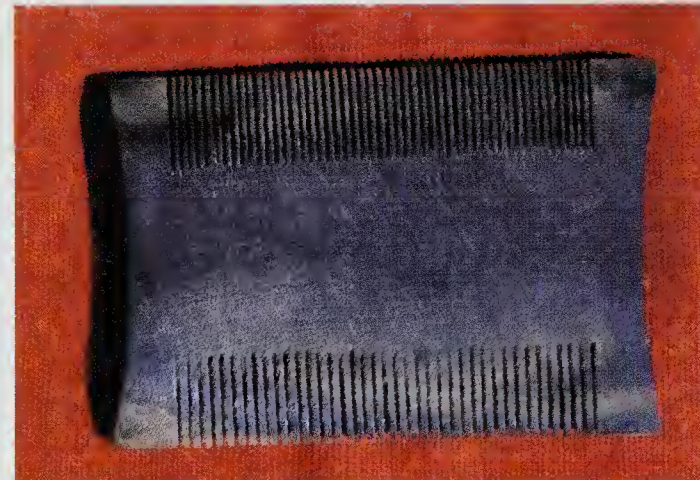
Decoration of bamboo combs with strenuous poker work by the Akas reveals their excellence of craftsmanship intimately associated with aesthetics and beauty.



SOLIGA
Karnataka



DHURWA
Chhattisgarh



KOYA
Orissa



DANDAMI MARIA
Chhattisgarh

Ritualistic aspect of human life is also represented by combs. In other words, combs reflect the cultural ethos of life.

The Baigas present combs to their brides as important items for brides' trousseaus which are preserved carefully in their dowry boxes. A small comb is ritually presented by a Kuki priest to a newly married couple. Such a comb is considered sacred and preserved throughout one's life.

The Dandami Marias, Murias, Dhurwas and Koyas also have ritual combs.

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Most of the combs picturised and grouped under different subheadings are mere representation of a major collection of the Anthropological Survey of India.

